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ABSTRACT

Approximately 20 percent of all American children regularly spend some time in self care. Under certain circumstances, leaving children home alone to care for themselves may be an appropriate option for some working parents. Still, such self care is risky business. This paper offers guidance to parents who choose to, or must, leave their children at home alone without adult supervision. Eleven tips for parents are discussed: (1) assess your child's ability to adequately care for himself or herself; (2) consider the quality of your neighborhood; (3) know how your job conditions will affect your ability to leave your child in self care; (4) consider your attitude about leaving your child unattended; (5) provide the child with a reasonable schedule of things to do; (6) work at communicating with your child; (7) define safety rules; (8) prepare for callers; (9) practice routines for dealing with strangers; (10) limit visits by the child's friends; and (11) consider combining self care with other forms of care, such as day care, babysitting, lessons, or afternoons at the local library. Discussion of these maxims points out dangers and ways of avoiding some of them. Emphasis is given to providing the most appropriate kind of care for each individual child. (RH)

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ADVICE FOR PARENTS OF LATCHKEY CHILDREN

by DR. THOMAS J. LONG

A five year old California boy is left alone in his own house while his mother is at work. A neighbor, aware that someone is in the house next door but unaware that it is a child, calls to report a burglary. A police officer arrives and, by the light of a flickering television set, sees a figure with a gun. The officer fires and kills a five year old holding a plastic pistol.

In Virginia, nine year old India calls 911. Her house is on fire. The emergency operator asks for India's address. The frightened girl can only manage the name of her street. While the operator tries to locate the girl, India and her younger brother are overcome by smoke and fire. They die as their cries for help are recorded by the 911 operator.

Returning home after school, a seven year old girl in Maryland takes a neighbor's big dog with her as she lets herself into her empty house. If a strange noise frightens her - which happens often - she shuts herself in a closet with the dog and cowers there until her mother gets home from work.

Incidents like these are frequently in the news, as we become more aware of the increasing numbers of children left unattended while their parents work. Children left home alone can develop a great deal of fear, be accidentally injured or be

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molested. There are plenty of unhappy stories.

Approximately 20% of all American children regularly spend some time in self care. These are the latchkey children - so called because of the house key they often carry and that has come to be their symbol. They are not all injured, molested, or even terribly frightened, though many are. In the same school where I interviewed the Maryland girl, I talked to a boy only slightly older. This youngster also goes home to an empty house. He lets himself in with his key, activates a security system, fixes a snack, does his homework, watches television and occasionally goes out to play with his friends.

"I like it fine," the boy told me, when asked about his situation. "Mom and dad explained just what I should do, and installed a security system so I wouldn't be frightened. When I'm worried about something, I call mom at work. I don't do that very often." His teachers report that he is cheerful, cooperative and bright, and he has maintained his good grades since his mother started her job.

Some kids handle self-care better than others. Some children are left unattended for briefer periods of time than others. Some parents work closer to their homes; some can be more easily reached by telephone. Some neighborhoods are safer. But no latchkey arrangement is without potential danger.

Concern about latchkey kids has grown sharply during the eighties. For a generation increasing numbers of children have been raised by single, working parents, or in households in which

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both parents work. More than 11 million children live with only one of their parents. Another 21 million children live in households in which both parents are employed. Today there are neighborhoods that are empty of adults on weekdays.

Despite potential dangers, parents who need to work choose self care as the second most common child care arrangement in America today. Some do so with a great deal of concern, others really believe that their children grow from self care.

"It's alright to leave children home alone for part of the day as long as you plan well for it," Judy J., a single parent of a twelve year old, told me. Her daughter has been a latchkey child off and on for six years. Not only has her daughter survived without apparent emotional wounds, but, in her mother's opinion, she has even benefited from the arrangement.

"I won't pretend that it's been problem-free," she said, "but I think it has made Sammy more self-reliant. She has learned to do a great deal for herself, she is very systematic about housework, she can cook and is good about filling her time with interesting and, I think, growth producing activities. Truthfully, I'm more concerned about her now that she has reached puberty than I have been at any time since her father left and I began leaving her home alone."

We are, as a nation, ambivalent about self care. Each day we hear reports of the dangers of leaving our children unattended. Each day there are more and more latchkey children. Professionals tell us that the best solution to our child care problems is to provide loving adult supervision for all our children, all the time. In reality, our need for child care slots outpaces availability. Eventually we may decide that all children need continuous adult supervision through age twelve, until then, we had better teach our children to survive, sometimes on their own, in a world that is far from perfect.

That people using self care don t complain much is understandable. Take the children, for example. Children, especially younger children, believe that their parents are good. They assume that whatever parents do is good. So, many children believe that any care arrangement provided for them is good. Children often suppress or repress any negative feelings they may experience as they work hard to maintain the only family structure they know. Children want their experiences to match the reality they assume to be true.

Then children receive plenty of reinforcement for being able to care for themselves. Parents tell their children that they are big boys and girls; that they are acting responsibly; contributing to the family. Peers often ridicule those children who are in day care or have a babysitter. And school age children often see self care as the only alternative to care geared for preschoolers. Consequently, few of them let their parents know just what it s like in self-care, especially the bad feelings.

Despite some feelings of guilt, parents also are reinforced by the latchkey arrangement. Self care is cheaper; parents are not kept on such a strict schedule when commitments at work detain them; parents often avoid the interpersonal and paperwork hassles center care or in-home nannies can produce; and many parents really believe that self care makes their children more responsible.

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Is change possible? Yes! But it is unlikely that there will be a rapid swing away from self care. In fact, self care has become the second most prevalent form of child care in America today - care by parents themselves is first. While waiting for glacial change in child care arrangements in the United States, there are several things we can do to make self care work more smoothly.

Assess your children. It is very risky to try self care with children younger than twelve, especially if they are home without older siblings. Children younger than that need the benefit of full-time adult supervision, either in their own homes, or in regulated day care settings. Many state child protective agencies set twelve as the age below which they will investigate complaints of children routinely left unsupervised.

Test your youngster's ability to handle the usual tasks and problems associated with self-care. Some mothers put their children through "basic training" before allowing them to care for themselves. I have talked with youngsters who were so small when they came home to an empty house they could not reach the lock. Why I think that parents would at least check that. Don't just tell your children how to handle emergencies, practice with them. Hold family fire drills. Set up mock emergencies and teach your children how to respond to them. Then test your children's ability to respond.

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There is a growing national trend to teach children self-care skills. Often such classes are an acknowledgement that children are being left unattended and need to learn the rudiments of personal survival. Even people who teach these classes worry, however, that the existence of such skills classes might increase the number of latchkey children simply because parents would then believe that their children were now prepared to care for themselves. Nancy Pfafflin, who has written a survival skills training program distributed through the extension service of the State of Virginia, inserts a disclaimer before all of her programs warning that the presentation of her materials does not indicate approval of the latchkey arrangement. Those of us who are working in this field find ourselves in a real bind, do we not give needed information to children that might save their lives for fear of seeming to approve of parents leaving their children unattended?

Imagine that her brother might be alive today, if they had been better trained in survival skills. Ever such simple commands as, "In case of fire, get out!" might have helped. Teaching children such important information as their own telephone number, street address, or the cross streets nearest their home, may save their lives.

Consider your neighborhood. The quality of your neighborhood is a

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very important factor. Your chances of success aren't good, if you live in a neighborhood that makes you or your youngsters afraid. If children barricade themselves in the house because of drugs and gangs or worse, they start out with two strikes against them.

Do you live in a neighborhood where you can count on friendly adults being around when your children need them? If you don't, especially if your neighborhood is not a particularly safe one, look for available day-care services for your children. Your youngsters may tell you that they are handling self-care just fine, but the risk they are running of sooner or later being hurt physically or psychologically is too great.

If you believe that you can trust them, talk with your neighbors about your family situation. Your own embarrassment or guilt can kill your children. The five year old in California may still be alive, if the neighbor who called the police had known that the child was in the house.

Assess your job. A latchkey arrangement is difficult for parents whose jobs involve a lot of travel, unpredictable hours or assignments far from home. It's important to ask how understanding your prospective employer is going to be. Will your boss object if your child phones you? Will you be able to leave work in an emergency? What is the company policy about sick leave?

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companies vary widely in their sympathy toward child care problems. Many act as though all families are still modeled after the families of the late 1940's, the kind associated with "Father Knows Best" or "Leave It to Beaver." Many that could, still refuse to allow flexibility in scheduling work time, for example. Flexible work schedules could ease some child care problems.

Other companies, however, are doing their best to accommodate new realities within the contemporary American family. Hoffman LaRoche, a New Jersey based pharmaceutical manufacturer, for example, recognizes the needs of non-traditional families. Among other things, the company provides an on-site day-care center for both pre-school and school-aged children. "Since the child-care center follows the same calendar as the company, it provides consistent and stable care for children of employees," says Bruce Lenz, center director.

If you are job-hunting, look for employer concern for the child care needs of their employees. Look for the company that will listen to your problems.

The effect of the latchkey arrangement on working parents touches employers too. A senior partner in a large Tennessee law firm continued to see that he was ready to let several of his firm's secretaries go because they spent so much time talking with their children by telephone. "Between three and five every afternoon

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work at communicating with your children. It is important to communicate to your child the feeling that you care whether or not you are home. One good way to do this is to have your child phone you at work as soon as he or she comes home. Better yet, you make the call. Say, "Hi, how are you doing? What have you learned new today?" A three-minute talk like this with a loving parent can brighten a child's whole day.

Andy, a ten-year-old boy who goes home to an empty New York apartment each afternoon, says he is cheered by the crazy notes his father leaves in the kitchen. Crazy notes? "Yeah," says Andy. "He leaves puzzles for me to figure out -- things like that." Andy says he is quite content with the year-old latchkey arrangement, and his excellent school record indicates that it has not upset his academic achievement. "What Dad is home we talk a lot," says Andy.

The quality of the relationship between parents and children is probably the key to how well a latchkey situation will work, at least when it comes to reducing or avoiding emotional scars. But quality isn't everything. There seems to be an absolutely minimum amount of time that children need with their parents in order to be able to understand them. Even if you take your children out to the ballet or a concert every time you see them, this cannot make up for only seeing them occasionally.

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home safety rules. Kids should be instructed to keep doors locked, whether they are inside or playing outdoors, when their parents are not at home. Tell children to answer the door through the door when they are inside alone. It's surprising how few adults do that, even in unsafe neighborhoods, and children tend to imitate their parents, no matter what they are told.

Instruct your children not to accept rides from people they don't know well. Tell your children to go into a friend's house or a store if they think someone is following them. They should not go home. Have them call you from this safe haven. On a bike or foot, they have all the driver for help.

If your children notice a door ajar, a broken window, or anything else that would cause them to think that someone might have broken into their home, instruct them not to go into the house themselves. They should go to a neighbor's house or the nearest telephone and call for help.

Have a safety check of your home. Make certain that all appliances are in good repair. Check locks on doors and windows. Invite your local police to conduct a home security check for you. Install smoke alarms. Map out a fire escape route and regularly conduct family fire drills. Show your child where the fuse or circuit breaker box is and what to do if the power goes off. Have

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a working flashlight and transistor radio on hand. Put together a first-aid kit for your children and teach them how to use each item in it. Enroll your children in a good first-aid course for children. The American Red Cross offers one in some locations. Teach them how to recognize and respond to a medical emergency.

Post emergency numbers near every phone in your house. Tape or pin them somewhere and make sure they stay there. The list should include your own number at work and, if possible, those of several other adults - people your child knows and likes - who live close enough to get to your home quickly. While latchkey children more frequently call their parents in an emergency than the local police or fire department, children should know these numbers too and they should be prominently displayed near the telephone.

Prepare for callers. Some parents tell their latchkey children never to answer the doorbell or the phone. It is probably better to instruct them to do both. There are two good reasons for this: 1) the caller could be a parent or someone with an important message; and 2) an apparently empty home is an invitation to a burglar.

Under no conditions, however, should your children tell a stranger they are home alone. Some parents suggest a 'white lie': "My mother is in the shower." This is not the best advice. I learned from my son that suggesting a child tell a direct lie has some

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real pitfalls. One day, when my wife was out of town, I left my son, who had chicken pox, to pick up my daughter from a friend's house. While I was gone someone called for me. Seth told them that I was taking a shower. "Oh, that's O.K.," the caller said, "I'll call back in a few minutes." When the caller called again in about ten minutes, 8 year-old Seth was nonplussed. "I told him, I'm not supposed to tell you this," Seth said, "but Dad's not really home at all." Instead of becoming trapped, kids should say something like, "My mother can't come to the phone right now, may I take a message?" In this way if the message is important the child can hang up and immediately call his or her mother. Children are not, in general, good liars.

Practice dealing-with-a-stranger routines with your children. Play the role of the stranger over the phone and at the door, and keep at it until your child's responses sound firm and convincing. It is particularly important to coach youngsters to end conversations quickly without being rude. The longer a conversation lasts, the more likely it is that the child will blurt out something that shouldn't have been said.

A child who has not been well drilled can easily be tricked. Adults are conned every day, children are no smarter. And instruct your child not to wear a key conspicuously. If I were a burglar or somebody interested in molesting children, I might hang around a school and follow kids with visible keys. Parents are

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surprised when they learn that the highest percentage of home burglaries occur during the afternoon and early evening hours.

Instruct your children to tell you about anything out of the ordinary that happens, including all calls. Even if nothing is wrong, it's important not to get so busy that you don't have time to hear how your children's day went. The less time you have to spend with your children, the more important it is for them to tell you what's happening in their lives. Set aside some time each day during which each child can talk privately with you.

Limit visiting friends. Don't allow your home to become a place where all the neighborhood children gather while you are away. Some parents ban all friends from the house, but the most workable policy seems to be one of allowing only a few select friends, or perhaps just one special friend. You don't want to cut off all a child's social life, if you can avoid doing so. On the other hand, it's hard to control things when you are not present. Parents of latchkey children are generally more willing to allow their children to play outside than to allow them to have friends visit.

If you decide to allow your child to have a visitor while you are away, set firm rules for the behavior of visiting friends. And then be sure your child knows what to do with a friend who wants to break the rules. Teach your youngster to divert a troublesome

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friend by suggesting some other activity. If that doesn't work, tell him to call an available adult for guidance.

Consider combinations. Try to work out latchkey arrangements in combination with day care, babysitting, lessons, or afternoons at the local library. You may want to do this as a way of easing your child into a latchkey situation; or of breaking the monotony often associated with the latchkey situation. Perhaps you can set it up so that your child is home alone for only a brief period each day, or on fewer days each week.

A very promising program is being tested in Fairfax County, Virginia, called a neighborhood check-in program. In this program an adult living in a neighborhood with several children who need after school supervision, volunteers to become the neighborhood check-in home provider. Parents who need monitoring for their children enroll them in the check-in program, pay a fee to the neighborhood provider, and leave the provider with specific instructions for each child. These instructions may include allowing the child to return to his or her own home, going to play in the park, or attend music or sport lessons. When children get back to their neighborhood after school, they check in at the home of their provider, then they may do whatever their parents have O.K.'d for them.

The neighborhood check-in home is there for children to use during

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after, sometimes before, school hours (usually until about 6 p.m.), but the care provider is not obligated to provide continuous visual supervision even during these hours. The main purpose of a check-in home is just that, a place for a child to check-into and to find adult assistance when otherwise needed.

Such an arrangement may help relieve the sense of obligation many parents of latchkey children feel when they ask neighbors to look out for little Johnny or Suzie. It offers a way for children to gradually accept self-care. And it assures the presence of an available adult in the absence of a child's parents.

Michelle Seligson, co-author of School Age Childcare: An Action Manual (Auburn House) and a strong advocate of school-based child care, emphasizes that parents don't have to think only of formal day-care services. Often these cost $10 a day or more. "In many places there are informal services that don't call themselves day care, but actually are," she points out. "All you have to do is work out the transportation logistics, perhaps pay a small fee for the program. Programs are operated by the Y's, Campfire, the Scouts, even community recreation programs."

The availability of suitable transportation is a major obstacle for many parents of latchkey children, however. Transportation often determines which care arrangement a parent will opt for. And many community recreation program staffers need better

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training in providing real supervision for the children who attend. All too often these programs provide activities, but staffers keep no record of the children who attend or what happens to them when the activity is ended.

If you are interested in improving or expanding the day-care services offered in your town, Michelle Seligson and her colleagues at The Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, Massachusetts, stand ready to tell you about the approaches they have found useful. But, as Michelle points out, "formal day care is not the answer for all children. Some chafe at being enrolled in organized activities after school."

There are children who might fare better as latchkey kids or in some form of latchkey-and-other care combination. With the right child in the right kind of setup, some type of latchkey arrangement might be preferred. But these cautions are necessary: the child should not be too young, left alone too long or subjected to too much stress. Furthermore, with regard to situations like fire, there is no such time as a _safe time_ to leave children at home alone or without alert, adult supervision."

Are there latchkey successes? After interviewing many adults who were once latchkey children, my wife and I were impressed by the successes some of them attained. We talked to one woman who had become an executive of a major corporation. She feels her

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executive ability came from her experience as a self-reliant youngster. And a number of other former latchkey children attained notable success in business. Success they attribute to the responsibility they learned taking care of themselves. But do the benefits outweigh the liabilities? The jury is still out on this. There are many adults today who suppressed the feelings they had about self care, but as we talk with them, they begin to bring back the negative feelings and the resentment.

The causes and effects of the latchkey arrangement are complex. No one answer will account for either. In some instances it may be the arrangement of choice, in others it may be a disaster. As a phenomenon, it accounts for the principle non-parental care arrangement for more than 25% of all school age children. Whether we like it or not, having children care for themselves as a routine arrangement is not likely to diminish in the near future.

The solutions are equally complex. The most dramatic change would be to bring school and work calendars into conformity. In this way parents could work when their children were in school and be home when their children were home. Failing something as sweeping as this, we could make greater use of our retired elderly as a growing cohort of care givers. We could expand the use of our school buildings into child care centers that offer care for children from birth at least through grade six. At present we should press for a multiplicity of solutions from which parents

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can choose. Each community must assess its child care liabilities and assets in order to generate as many responses to family needs as possible. The latchkey situation is a problem that should not be dumped exclusively on the shoulders of the nuclear family nor be shipped off to Washington for a political fix. It is one that should be addressed and hopefully solved.

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THOMAS D. LONG is author of SAFE AT HOME, SAFE ALONE (Miles River Press, 1985) and co-author, with his wife, of THE HANDBOOK FOR LATCHKEY CHILDREN AND YOUTH (Arbor House, 1983). He is a psychologist in private practice in the State of Maryland, Associate Professor of Education at The Catholic University of America, Washington, D. C., and President of the National Institute for Latchkey Children and Youth. Dr. Long resides in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

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